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IRENICUM; or An Humble
attempt to make a
Reconciliation be-
tween the Bishop of
North Carolina and
'Dissenting' Brethren

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IRENICUM;

OR,

An humble Attempt to make a Reconciliation

BETWEEN

THE BISHOP OF NORTH-CAROLINA AND SOME OF
HIS 'DISSENTING' BRETHREN,

BY SHOWING THAT

They do not differ so widely as the Public have been led to suppose;

IN A

RESPECTFUL AND FRIENDLY LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE
(RICHMOND) FAMILY VISITOR.

ADVERTISEMENT.

IN the Family Visitor, a religious newspaper printed in Richmond, Virginia, and patronized by Episcopalians as well as by other denominations, there appeared on the 8th of January last, some remarks of the Editor on the controversies which have arisen in England and America, with regard to the expediency of Churchmen's uniting in promiscuous societies for the circulation of the Scriptures without note or comment; in the course of which he gave it as his opinion, that Bishop Ravenscroft and others who refused to support the principle on which Bible Societies are founded, were utterly "*opposed to the distribution of the Scriptures*, unless accompanied by the Book of Common Prayer, or by a preacher of the Church" to which they belonged. As the Editor had not seen the Bible-Society-Sermon of Bishop Ravenscroft, but had drawn his information respecting its sentiments from a short notice which appeared in the Raleigh Register, it was not to be supposed that he could have had a just or perfect knowledge of its contents: a friend, if the Bishop therefore sent him a copy of the discourse, with a request that he would publish certain parts of it in the Visitor, and at the same

time correct the misstatements contained in the paper of the date above mentioned. The Sermon was printed entire, but the piece correcting the misstatements was refused admission, *because* it was too long!—*because* it evaded the point at issue!!—*because*, from certain allusions, the people could not understand it!—*because* Bishop Ravenscroft possibly might not be pleased with it!!—*because* it would have a tendency to produce an unprofitable, if not injurious, controversy;—*because*, &c. &c.—(*Visitor*, Feb. 19.) The correspondence was here suspended from a desire of preserving peace, and would not have been resumed on the part of the present writer, if another attack upon Bishop Ravenscroft had not appeared in the same paper a few weeks since, in the shape of an extract from the Theological Repertory. This, like the former article, contained gross misrepresentations, which no friend of the Bishop could suffer to pass without censure. A second letter was therefore sent to the Editor; but, disregarding all the rules which should regulate the press when the character of individuals in high stations is at stake, he returned it to the writer, without giving the shadow of an excuse for his conduct, or even noticing its receipt in his paper. No alternative remains but to publish it in a pamphlet form, and in this manner to make an appeal to the good sense and justice of the community at large, who will please to bear in mind, that no unfriendly feelings are harboured by the writer against the Editor of the *Visitor*, who deserves commiseration rather than reprehension for his want of judgment in selecting and refusing articles intended for the amusement or edification of his readers.

N. B. The notes in brackets [] have been added since the letter was first sent to the *Visitor*.

IRENICUM.

MR. EDITOR,

IN several of your late papers, I have seen some good remarks on the expediency of cultivating harmony and a friendly intercourse among the different members of the Christian family, as the best means of stopping the mouths of gainsayers, and of exhibiting Christianity in the form in which it appeared, when its divine Founder 'went about doing good.' These remarks, made without doubt, in a spirit of meekness and moderation, and with a sincere desire of removing every impediment to the progress of 'pure and undefiled religion,'—should be well weighed by the earnest inquirer after truth, and should command the attention of all who profess to follow the rule, 'thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' But, while I applaud and admire the spirit which dictated your sentiments, I must be allowed to say that there is one gentleman of some distinction, towards whom you do not appear to feel that good-will which you so warmly recommend to others. The bishop of the diocese of North-Carolina has rendered himself obnoxious to your displeasure; and although you will acknowledge that he is a pious and exemplary pastor, and that he preaches faithfully the "fundamental doctrines of Christianity," yet because he holds and fearlessly maintains certain principles, which to you seem peculiarities, you get out of patience at every recollection of him, and take every opportunity to aim a direct blow, or a side thrust, at what are known to be his sentiments.*

Now, Sir, I beg that you will not consider me as desiring to stir up a controversy,† or as wishing to excite unhallowed feelings; but when I find a distinguished preacher of the Gospel, a zealous champion of the cross, a devoted and faithful minister, whose exertions in Virginia for the cause of his Master have been crowned with signal success—when I find such a man repeatedly held up to be pointed at with the finger of scorn, my passions become roused; and I naturally make the inquiry whether his principles are so dreadful in their consequences as they are represented, and I endeavour to ascertain whether that charity which hopeth all things, may not be extended to his frailties, (supposing them to be such,) which is extended to all who are acknowledged to hold the "fundamentals." I trust then, that you will permit one who looks upon Bishop R. as "more sinned against than sinning," to make a few observations on certain misstatements which have appeared in your paper, and which I am willing to impute rather to a zeal for exposing error, than to any design of misrepresentation or perversion; and if your readers shall find from these remarks, that the bishop has said nothing more than what the most eminent divines of different denominations have said, it is to be hoped that they will not indulge in farther unjust or illiberal imputations, but will patiently wait for his replies to the attacks of his most able antagonists; one of which will appear in the bookstores in the course of a very few days.‡

* Some of the strictures which have appeared in the Visitor are extracted from the Washington Repertory, but the editor of the Visitor approves of them, and by publishing them, adopts them as his own.

† The controversy in *Virginia*, respecting the principle of the Bible Society, originated with the Family Visitor; for when the editor published his first remarks, (Jan. 8, 1825,) not a copy of Bishop Ravenscroft's Bible Society Sermon was to be obtained in the bookstores in Virginia—but its circulation was almost entirely confined to North-Carolina. If the dispute is prolonged, and becomes productive of unfriendly feelings, I shall take no blame to myself, as my only object is to correct errors, and to have justice done to Bishop R. The editor of the Visitor refused to admit a piece in vindication of the bishop, on the 19th of February last, because, among other reasons, it "would have a tendency to produce an unprofitable, if not injurious controversy;" but I would respectfully inquire whether it was fair or charitable to admit strictures from the Repertory, when every thing on the other side had been excluded?

‡ I refer to the answer to Professor Mitchell's letter, lately published in the Professor's 'Correspondence.' Such is the bishop's confidence in the goodness of his cause, that I am informed,

1. An opinion which prevails throughout the community, and which the opponents of Bishop R. seem fond of repeating, is, that he is unfavourable to the distribution of the Scriptures without note or comment. The editors of the Repertory and Evangelical Magazine have lately asserted this in very broad terms; and from the following paragraph, it certainly appears that you agree with them in supposing that such are the sentiments of the bishop.

"It is a *curious* as well as a painful circumstance in the history of the present age, that while the Catholics in the heart of Europe, where ignorance, and superstition, and implicit confidence in papal infallibility have reigned for ages, are earnestly seeking copies of the Bible, or zealously engaged in its circulation, *Protestant bishops* are to be found who *oppose its distribution* in this land of liberty, intelligence, and free inquiry." (*See notice of Bishop Ravenscroft's Sermon in Family Visitor, January 8, 1825.*) But is this the fact with regard to the bishop of North-Carolina? Let us hear his own words:—"As it seems to be the determination of many who write and speak on this subject, to denounce the author as an enemy to the distribution of the Scriptures, notwithstanding his express declarations to the contrary, he thinks proper to repeat most solemnly, that the charge is unfounded." "Nor yet is the author opposed to the reading of the Scriptures *without a commentator*, as is falsely charged against him. On the contrary, he has many witnesses how earnestly and repeatedly he presses the study of the word of God upon his hearers: and it is his invariable rule, when consulted what commentator to begin the reading of the Scriptures with, to answer, *None*; recommending to all to be first well grounded in the Scriptures themselves, by reading, meditation, and prayer, when a sound and judicious commentator may be helpful." (*Preface to Bible Society Sermon, p. 5.*)

But supposing that Bishop R. had asserted that it was inexpedient to circulate the Bible without a Prayer Book, or an authorized ministry to accompany it; would he have gone farther in principle than the first men in the Presbyterian church? Would he have taken bolder ground than is taken by the General Assembly or Dr. Miller, when they recommend the circulation of Creeds and Confessions? What says Dr. Miller? "Confessions of faith, judiciously drawn and solemnly adapted by particular churches, are *not only* invaluable as bonds of union and fences against error, but they also serve an important purpose, as *accredited manuals of Christian doctrine*, well fitted for the instruction of those private members of churches, who have neither leisure, nor *habits of thinking sufficiently close*, to draw from the sacred writings themselves a *consistent system of truth*." (*Lecture, p. 35.*) And what says the united wisdom of the Presbyterian Church in America? "Though the confessions of faith, and standards of our Church, are of no original authority, independent of the Scriptures, yet we regard them as a *summary of those divine truths* which are diffused through the sacred volume. They, as a system of doctrines, therefore, cannot be abandoned in our opinion, without AN ABANDONMENT of the word of God." (*Minutes of General Assembly, 1824.*) According, therefore, to the principles of the highest authority in the Presbyterian communion—according to the principles of one of their most distinguished professors—private Christians cannot derive from the Scriptures alone, a *consistent system of truth*—but the word of God must be abandoned, unless it be accompanied with confessions of faith: principles these, which we would recommend to the '*Editors of the Catholic Miscellany*' to insert in their paper, as evidence that the Presbyterians were all *coming round*, if we really supposed that men could be such idiots as to mistake every thing which "LOOKS LIKE POPERY" for popery itself.

he has actually ordered 300 copies of Mr. Mitchill's letter to be struck off, to be distributed gratuitously among those Episcopalians who read the reply. It ought to be understood that the principal ground of controversy at the present time, is *not* the expediency of supporting the Bible Society, but the proper rule in the interpretation of Scripture. See the *third* of the following observations.

I am well aware of the distinction which has been drawn by the editors of the Visitor and Evangelical Magazine, between requiring "an explicit declaration of a person's assent to the doctrines held by any church before he is admitted into its bosom"—and "making this assent the condition on which the Bible shall be put into the hands of those who are sitting in the region and shadow of moral death;"* and I am well aware that Dr. Miller, in a late letter, has declared his belief that it was not impossible "for a serious inquirer to understand the fundamental doctrines of Scripture, without the assistance of formularies and confessions;" but had these gentlemen carefully examined the above quoted passages, they would have endeavoured to extricate themselves from the dilemma in a different manner, or else would have acknowledged, what I have the charity to believe, that the language used by the Assembly and the professor was extremely unguarded.†

2. Connected with this subject is the opinion of Bishop Horsley, which has been triumphantly referred to by the Repertory, the Visitor, and the Evangelical Magazine, as a complete refutation of Bishop R's. sentiments on the rule of faith. But before we condemn the Bishop of North-Carolina, on the authority of the Lord Bishop of St. Asaph, let us inquire whether they *actually differ* in sentiment with regard to the 'sufficiency of the Scriptures,' and the best method of studying them. The following passages from their respective sermons, ~~placed~~ in parallel columns, will place the prelates in a more favourable light than some well disposed Christians are willing to view them:—

Horsley.

"The Bible studied will indeed prove to be what we Protestants esteem it, a *certain and sufficient rule of faith and practice*—a helmet of salvation—which alone may quench the fiery darts of the wicked." (*Sermon from Psa. xcvi. 7; quoted in Repertory and Visitor, &c.*)

"It should be a rule with every one who would read the Holy Scriptures *with advantage and improvement*, to compare every text, which may seem either important for the doctrine it may contain, or remarkable for the turn of the expression, *with the parallel passages in other parts of holy writ*; that is, with the passages in

Ravenscroft.

"That the Scriptures are the well-spring of life and hope to fallen man, and *the infallible rule of his faith and practice* to every Christian, is *assented to by all*." "It is indubitably certain, that Holy Scripture containeth all things *necessary to salvation*, so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or *be thought requisite or necessary to salvation*, as it is expressed in the sixth article of our Church." (*Sermon on Interpretation of Scripture, pp. 3, 6.*)

"To search the Scriptures, to any *profitable purpose*, we must begin with the foundation, and regularly go on, to the finishing of the superstructure, and *comparing spiritual things with spiritual*, (that is, a recorded purpose with its exact fulfilment,) obtain that full conviction of the infallible truth and divine authority of

* See Visitor, Feb. 19, 1825; and Evangelical Magazine for June, p. 323; and Dr. Miller's letter addressed to the New-York Christian Journal, and republished in the Evangelical Magazine for February.

[† The General Assembly, fearful of the consequences which might result from a reasonable construction of their opinions as expressed in 1824, have determined to *put down* at once all opposition; and, if we may judge from the following paragraph, as charitable as it is true, have resolved that the whole world shall bend to their *authority*. "To oppose this institution (the American Bible Society) is to *fight against God*. And yet we have seen *infidels*, and *half reformed Protestants*, UNITING with the *Papal hierarchy*, in *opposing* the circulation of the word of life: as though the volume which Jehovah has adapted to the constitution of man, and sent down from above for his use, and made efficient in his redemption, and commanded to be given unto him, could not with SAFETY be committed to his hands."—(*Narrative of the State of Religion, &c. May 26, 1825.*)]

Horsley.

which the subject matter is the same, the sense equivalent, or the turn of expression similar." (*Same Sermon.*)

"Particular diligence should be used in comparing the parallel texts of the Old and New Testaments." "In doing this, you will imitate the example of the godly Jews of Berea, which is recorded with approbation in the Acts; who, when Paul and Silas reasoned with them out of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, clearly setting before them the prophecies concerning the Messiah, and the accomplishment of those prophecies in Jesus, whom they preached, 'searched the Scriptures daily, whether these were so.'" (*Ibid.*)

Our Right Rev. Fathers are, therefore, so far from being at loggerheads with each other, that they agree perfectly on the subject of the sufficiency of Scripture, and of the necessity of a careful examination of its several parts, in order to make it the power of God unto salvation. But this is not all. Bishop Horsley not only agrees with Bishop Ravenscroft, but in this very Sermon which has been so much applauded, recommends a method of studying the Scriptures, which the invariable usage of Bible Societies renders impracticable; and if the writer in the Repertory will have the candour to correct his mistakes, he will ask Bishop Ravenscroft's pardon, and acknowledge at the same time that he acted unfairly in omitting those parts of Bishop Horsley's Sermon which had reference to the printing of "*marginal readings.*" In reading the article quoted in the Visitor, I observed the words, ["If the Bible be studied *in this manner,*"] occurring in different places; and although "parallel passages" are once spoken of, I should not have known the precise object of Bishop Horsley's remarks, if I had not referred to the Sermon itself, where I ascertained that he had been recommending to the "Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge," the publication of Bibles with a "*full margin,*" in order that the "*illiterate Christian*" might, by consulting the marginal references, compare parallel texts,—and "*in this manner*" attain that practical knowledge which is necessary to salvation. You may, therefore, judge of my surprise and mortification, Mr. Editor, at seeing a respectable magazine garbling the sentiments of an author, in order to support the cause of societies which forbid any Bibles to be issued from their presses with marginal readings, and thus pre-

Ravenscroft.

Revelation, which is indispensable to any thing worthy the name of rational assurance, in working out our everlasting salvation."

"The duty enjoined, and under consideration, [of searching the Scriptures,] involves the careful examination and *comparison*, not only of the several parts with each other, but of each part with the whole." "The unbelieving Jews having rejected the evidence of John the Baptist, to the person and office of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and resisted the testimony of our Lord's own miraculous power, in attestation of the same fact, are by him referred to the Scriptures. In which reference it must be clear that our Lord meant such a careful consideration and comparison of what was foretold by the prophets concerning the Messiah, with the events then fulfilling before their eyes, as must be sufficient for correcting their erroneous prejudices, and to produce a rational conviction of the truth." (*Ibid.* p. 4.)

clude the possibility of studying the Scriptures in the 'manner' so zealously enforced by the author referred to.

3. The main ground of controversy, at the *present* time, between Bishop Ravenscroft and his opponents, is the opinion given by him on the subject of the correct interpretation of Scripture. This opinion was alluded to in his Bible Society Sermon, and enlarged upon in a subsequent discourse, entitled, "A Sermon on the Study and Interpretation of the Scriptures;" and as the former, being written in haste, and for a different purpose, could not be expected to be as full and explicit on this point as the importance of the subject demanded, it is proper to quote from the latter so much as will place the author's sentiments on the rule of faith in a clear light, and guard him from misrepresentation.

"While it is indubitably certain (says Bishop R.) that Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation, so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation, as it is expressed in the sixth article of the Church; it is nevertheless equally certain, that uniformity of belief and practice among men, in other words, Christian unity, must depend upon the interpretation given to the Scriptures—upon the sense and application made of the doctrines and precepts therein revealed. It is, therefore, of the last importance to the very being of the Scriptures as the *only* standard of saving faith, as well as to the comfort of your own souls, that your minds should be grounded and settled on this point. To this end I shall give the rule, and then explain and enforce it, by some plain and obvious examples."

"The rule then is, that *that* interpretation of Scripture is to be followed and relied upon, as the true sense and meaning, which has invariably been held and acted upon by the one Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. In explanation of this rule, it is to be borne in mind, my brethren, that while God hath fully and clearly revealed his will to us, yet he hath so done it, as to *form a part of our trial*. While *all things necessary to salvation* are set forth in his word for our learning, Scripture is nevertheless so constructed, that "the *unlearned* and the *unstable* can *wrest* ~~it~~ *to their own destruction*," and the word of the Gospel is either 'a savour of life or a savour of death,' as we receive and apply it. Now if this was the case in the Apostolic age, as *St. Peter* and *St. Paul* both declare that it was, *much more* is it possible and to be expected in these days of multiplied divisions and latitudinarian departure from the faith; and, therefore, the more earnestly to be contended against by those who are set for the defence of the Gospel."

"If the inquiry then be, which of two or more conflicting doctrines or systems of religion be the right one, and to be received and relied upon as the truth of God,—I answer, first, "*how readeest thou, what saith the Scripture?*" Is one of the doctrines or systems clearly revealed therein, or reasonably without force and refinement, to be deduced from what is thus revealed? Is it free from opposition to the other doctrines and general design of revelation? If so, there need be no difficulty: the doctrine or system thus supported is to be received as true. But suppose the ingenuity of man's wisdom, in support of some favourite system, shall have thrown over the subject such a gloss of perverted Scripture and specious reasoning, as to render it difficult for a plain mind to disentangle the sophistry of the argument, and for an humble mind to resist the authority of great and learned names, and of numerous bodies of professing Christians built upon this system,—what then is the only standard to which we can have recourse? To this I answer, *the word of God as received, believed, and acted upon universally by the primitive Church*"—(Sermon, pp. 6 and 7.)

Now, Sir, to apply this rule to one or two disputed doctrines. The eternal generation of the Son of God is a doctrine maintained by the great body of true believers; yet we know that a spirited controversy arose on this subject about two years since, between Professor Stewart and Professor Miller, both

generally reputed to be *orthodox*, learned, and pious. These gentlemen referred in the first place to Scripture,—but as the passages of Scripture relating to the eternal generation were very few, and as the “ingenuity of man’s wisdom threw over the subject such a gloss of *perverted* Scripture and *specious reasoning*, as to render it difficult for a plain mind to disentangle the sophistry of the argument,” recourse was had to “*the word of God, as received, believed, and acted upon universally by the primitive Church*,” not because the writers imagined that the opinions of the Fathers *proved* the eternal generation, but because (in the language of Professor Kidd) “these opinions demonstrated the sentiments of many, whose *opportunities of knowledge from the earliest preachers of Christianity* were most extensive, and whose rank, piety, and research are universally acknowledged by the Catholic Church.*

Let us take one more case. Infant baptism has been a subject of a great deal of contention in the Christian Church. The Pædobaptist confidently refers to the word of God, and verily believes that although there is no express and special command for the baptism of infants, yet its propriety and necessity may be established by inference. And if the justice of his conclusions be denied, he refers to the practice of the primitive Church as the best commentary on Scripture,—he refers to the “*Semper, Ubique, Ab Omnibus*,” of Vincentius, to prove the fact of universal custom derived from the Apostles. Such is the mode of argument used in the first number of the Pamphleteer, and as the author holds a distinguished rank among the divines of Virginia, I shall make a few extracts from his work, not for the purpose of arguing the question of infant baptism, nor of defending his mode of reasoning; but merely to show that Bishop Ravenscroft has done nothing more than *maintain the principles* which have been acted upon by the first men of other denominations.

At p. 64 of the *Pamphleteer*, Dr. Rice commences a “brief account of the most direct and explicit testimonies of the Fathers” on infant baptism, and refers to Origen, of the third century, who has these remarkable words: “*The Church hath received a tradition from the Apostles, to give baptism unto infants.*”

The next testimony (p. 65) is that of “a whole council, consisting of above sixty Bishops;” and the “*unanimity of such a number*” is adduced as an argument that “there was but one opinion and one practice in the whole Christian Church, with respect to infant baptism.”

The third proof is from the work which “goes under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite.” In answer to the question, “why children are made partakers of the sacred birth,” he says—“Many things of which we do not now see the reason, are worthy of God. We affirm of this the same things which our *divine guides have handed down* to us. Our *divine guides* appointed that infants should be admitted after the sacred manner.”—“By divine guides, saith Maxentius, is meant the *Apostles*.”—(P. 66.)

Passing over the testimonies of Gregory, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Paulinus, who flourished as late as the fourth century, we come to Augustine of the fifth. “In his discourse concerning baptism,” he says—“This is held as *tradition by the universal Church*, when infants are baptized, &c.”—(P. 68.)

The last testimony is from the decrees of the councils of Carthage and Miletus, which sat in the fifth century, in the second of which it is said “that the Catholic Church, every where diffused, always understood and asserted that this was an Apostolical practice.”

With much respect, I am, Sir, your obedient and humble Servant,

CANDOUR.

[Note.—For an admirable specimen of the ingenuity which some men possess, of supporting opposite sides of a question at different times, the reader is referred to the June number of the Evangelical Magazine, edited by the author of the Pamphleteer.]

* See a Dissertation on the Eternal Sonship, by Dr. Kidd, a learned Presbyterian divine of Scotland, chap. xiv.

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